

tion has ceased to have any practical significance. The lowest degree of life in the world of the spirit, the Areopagite would say, contains and includes the highest and best of the whole material world. Faith places us already in possession, veiled beneath material symbols, of that which we still hope for. Moreover we enjoy that life only in Christ, '*reconcilians ima summis*', 'in whom all things consist' (Col. 1, 17). Even as, in this life, while firmly rooted in this world, we are, at the same time by grace 'fellow-citizens with the saints' (Eph. 11, 19), so, after the general judgment, we shall be, what is equally paradoxical, a 'spiritual body' (1 Cor. 15, 44), neither spirit nor body but men. In the meantime the Church continues to pray that we may be '*in utroque salvati*'.¹²

THE WAY AND THE MEANS

ACCORDING TO *THE CLOUD*

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is usually taken as the symbol of the unknown in modern thought. If a man wishes to discover an unknown figure or fact, he begins by positing 'X' as the object of his enquiry and then he proceeds to argue in such a way as to reveal the nature of that unknown. In the 'argument' of the spiritual life the process is largely reversed. Having begun with a 'clear idea' of God, derived partly from reason and partly from faith, the Christian gradually ascends the holy mount until this sun disappears behind the luminous cloud and he finds himself surrounded thickly on all sides by the Unknown. It is in many ways the conclusion of his search.

But having become aware that he is enveloped in this cloud of unknowing, the Christian may well take the opportunity to run over in his mind the way he came into this place and the means he had taken to ensure that he should ascend at every pace. It is not unfitting, therefore, at this point in the study of the Ascent according to the way of the English Mystics to look back summarily with the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* to ascertain the path which has been followed to this spot. For the author presents the traditional map of the way to believers in rather unusual colours.

To begin with, the degrees of the spiritual life are here listed in an unusual way. *The Cloud* opens with a fourfold division of the

¹² Postcommunion 11th Sunday after Pentecost.

christian life which seems rather to follow the author's own investigations than to be derived from any authority, for he says that he finds the division in his 'boisterous beholding', i.e., in his rough, unskilled reflection. These four degrees, following each other consecutively, are *Common*, *Special*, *Singular*—all of which may be begun and ended in this life—and *Perfect*, which though begun on earth can only be accomplished in the eternity of heaven. At first there is the common degree of Christian men which is one of 'worldly' people for whom religion is a matter of precept and obligation. This they fulfil with varying degrees of success but they have practically no first-hand knowledge of the love of God; it is all regarded in terms of obedience to his will. Commonly this obedience is taken as a burden. But God's love presses upon the soul until it awakens therein a true desire for him expressed at first in a special and more spiritual intent upon obedience. This is a 'more *special* state and form of living' (p. 8). We must remember that the author of *The Cloud* is probably writing to a young religious, and in that case the distinction between 'state' and 'form' may well be significant. Any Christian who takes his life of grace seriously must follow this form of a servant, observing in what way he may readily do the will of the Master. The religious has been drawn by God into a 'state' of service, where having pledged himself by vow he begins a special type of the active practice of the moral virtues.

This generosity in special service does not remain unrewarded by God who proceeds to pour out his love more overpoweringly, like the lover who takes advantage of every sign of an answer on the part of the beloved.

Seest thou not how sweetly and how graciously he hath privily pulled thee to the third degree and manner of living, the which is called *singular*? In the which solitary form and manner of living thou mayest learn to lift up the foot of thy love, and to step towards that state and degree of living that is perfect, and the last state of all. (p. 8).

It is, as we have noticed before, a common experience of those who are specially generous in their acceptance of God's will that he leads them into solitary places apart. This is no physical desert, but the desert of a certain unwitting estrangement from companions and friends and a preoccupation with heavenly things which makes it difficult at first for them to adjust themselves to their natural surroundings. But such as these are being led to the fulfilment of charity either in religion, in which the 'state' of perfection ceases to be a mere organisation and becomes a concrete form of life, or outside religious orders in a life in itself full to overflowing with the

love of God and 'formed' by love.

Such is the first rather external scheme of the ascent, based to a large extent on comparison with others. Later on, however, the author plots the Way in the more traditional and more interior manner, i.e., according to the active and contemplative life, and the threefold comparison of good, better, best (or beginner, proficient, perfect) which two scales he deftly interlocks to show how they outline the same growth towards holiness. The first scheme of the relation between action and contemplation is sufficiently important to justify its being quoted at length:

There be two manner of lives in Holy Church. The one is active life, and the other is contemplative life. Active is the lower and contemplative the higher. Active life hath two degrees, a higher and a lower; and also contemplative life hath two degrees, a lower and a higher. These two lives be so coupled together, that although they differ in part, yet neither of them may be had fully without some part of the other. Because that part that is the higher part of the active life, that same part is the lower part of contemplative life. *So that a man may not be fully active, except he be in part contemplative; nor yet fully contemplative . . . except he be in part active.* (c. 8. p. 30. Italics mine).

He goes on to describe how the first part of the active life is concerned with bodily works of mercy and charity; the second part, which is identified with the lower part of contemplation to become the better or proficient way,¹ is concerned with discursive prayer and compunction for sin together with praise and thanksgiving; finally the higher part of contemplation enters the cloud of unknowing 'with a loving stirring and a blind beholding into the naked being of God himself only'. A man thus begins to act in things less than himself — 'without himself and beneath himself'; then in the second stage he enters into himself and becomes 'even with himself'; and finally he is raised above himself. In this higher stage of true contemplation he must cease for a time from the lower discursive type of prayer; just as he must cease for a time from external activities in order to give himself to meditations.

In chapters 17 to 21, where the author discusses the relationship between Martha and Mary, further light is thrown upon this threefold division. Consideration of the manhood of Christ in prayer and meditation lies, in the author's view, in the middle way which is the higher of the active and the lower of the contemplative. So since she

¹ This identification should be compared with Hilton's *Scale*, where the higher form of active life is shown to penetrate in some way into the beginning of the contemplative way of life.

had chosen the best part, he is forced to grant Mary even sitting at the feet of our Lord a form of converse which probed beyond the body of Christ and rested barely on his divine words.

She regarded not the business of her sister . . . nor yet the preciousness of his blessed body, nor the sweet voice and the words of his manhood. . . . But she regarded the sovereignest wisdom of his Godhead lapped in the dark words of his manhood. (c. 17. p. 53). Because our Lord says that Mary has chosen the *best* part and there can be no best out of two, the author here argues that the higher state of contemplation was the object of Mary's choice rather than merely the contemplative life in general. He goes on to explain that this, the best and holiest part of contemplation, lies in the cloud of unknowing, and so the soul cannot heed the words of complaining active people. Finally in *Privy Counsel* the author considers the division of the active life and the contemplative in relation to the use of reason. Learning and study and the active use of a man's reason belong evidently to active life, while in the contemplative the highest wisdom of man 'is far put under' the wisdom of God. There seems to be a suggestion that the blinding approach of Truth is hindered by the use of reason and natural wit (cf. *Ep. Privy Counsel*, c. 10).

In these passages the author has set forth a very personal and penetrating view of the traditional doctrine concerning the three ways and the two lives. He knits action and contemplation closely into the same pattern, and in this he makes a very valuable point:

In this part are contemplative life and active life coupled together in ghostly kinship and made sisters after the ensample of Martha and Mary (c. 21, p. 61).

He adopts, however, a very modern attitude by distinguishing the two lives far more than his contemporaries, for he seems to make them each an independent way to heaven. Medieval writers for the most part show that the active life leads to contemplation and so to heaven. But in *The Cloud* it is *either* the one *or* the other by which a Christian is saved. For this reason the necessity of a very special vocation is emphasised, and no one is allowed to aspire to Mary's part unless in a sense he be pushed into it by the hand of God. Even should a man feel a 'soft growing desire' for God and contemplation, he may not take it upon himself to seize the best part. It seems that he may only be called to salvation in the higher sphere of action which is only the beginning of contemplation, for he must simply wait—'let him stand yet still at the door, as a man called to salvation but not yet to perfection'. (*Priv. Couns.* c. 10. p. 222). He must refrain altogether from jealousy of the 'best part' if God has not

called him to perfection. He must make no comparison regarding the way God works in his soul and in those of his neighbours.

Have peace with thy part, whichever thou have. Thou needest not to complain, for they be both precious. (id. p. 223).

The advice here given is of the utmost importance in the matter of vocation, for there are still a great many people who imagine that 'the best' Christian life must necessarily be for them because they are not content with anything but the best. Whether the question be one of a vocation for life with the desire to run quickly into a strictly enclosed order, or whether it be regarding the type of prayer to which a person is called, the mystery of God's election and of God's manner of working must always be the first consideration. God must necessarily be always working in the soul, but in him whom he has specially chosen the soul must be passive, so that here God's 'vocation' is also God's operation. In the *Epistle of Privy Counsel* the author shows how God works progressively: first in the sinner 'only by sufferance and not by consent to our final damnation', secondly 'in deeds that be active and lawful, he is with us both by suffering and consent', and thirdly 'in deeds that be contemplative, he is with us principally stirring and working, and we only but suffering and consenting'. (c. 10. p. 225). The doctrine of this chapter is of the greatest practical value.²

Continuing on the traditional lines of ascetic teaching *The Cloud* lays down the principal activities in which beginners and 'profiters' must occupy themselves so as to be able to wait with good hope for God to call and to move them in the higher work of contemplation. *The Cloud* apparently refers the reader to the Carthusian prior Guigo II's *Scala Claustralium* in which the beginners are principally concerned with 'Lesson' (or Reading), the profitters with 'Meditation' (or Thinking), the devout with 'Orison' (or Praying) and they 'that be holy and blessed with God' with Contemplation.³ In order to reach meditation the Christian beginner must devote considerable time to reading and listening to holy discourses—for the unlettered must needs 'read in clerks, when they hear them preach the word of God' (c. 35, p. 88). The word, written or spoken, is a mirror wherein a man first learns to see with the eye of his reason the spots that may be spattered on his conscience. Seeing a spot he runs to the well to wash it away.

² Another point of interest for our own times is his description of the opposition of 'actives' to those who wish to live purely contemplative lives—'their own brethren and their sisters, and all their nearest friends . . . with a great complaining spirit shall rise upon them, and sharply reprove them, and say that it is nought that they do'. (*Cloud*, c. 18).

³ Cf. Dom Justin McCann's note to his edition, page 87.

If this spot be any special sin, then is this well Holy Church and this water confession, with the circumstances thereof. If it be but a blind root and a stirring of sin, then is this well merciful God, and this water prayer. (c. 35, pp. 89-90).

In other words a man must begin with the exterior rule of conduct by which to enliven his conscience and so gradually to reach an interior criterion of sin. And this he does by reading and listening.

Next comes Meditation, for 'prayer may not well be gotten in beginners and profifiers without thinking coming before' (id. p. 88). And for those who are intent on the work of *The Cloud* the author says that 'Lessons' will not be immediately necessary. Their meditations will be spontaneous and will circle simply round two points—sin in self, and goodness in God. Such a meditation, as we shall see later, can hardly be called discursive as it proceeds by 'sudden conceits' and 'blind feelings' which come from God rather than from man. And so is it also with prayer; for the worker in this work,—apart from the official and traditional worship of the Church which he will cherish with the utmost reverence,—will pray without 'means or premeditation' and in sudden brief words. (cc. 36 and 37).

From all this it will be seen that the author builds up his teaching on the traditional teaching of the Church which he summarises very practically and attractively; but his own experience and his own special contribution to spiritual doctrine grow in an almost unfamiliar shape out of the common teaching. We must now, therefore, try to follow him step by step into the centre of the special work of which he is always writing.

First of all it must be quite clear that *The Cloud* is considering a supernatural work of God's which is only one way out of a number of possible ways of reaching the best part, chosen so felicitously by Mary. It must not be classed among the works of the natural mystics who by specialised exercises and techniques induce in themselves peculiar mystic states. The author answers those who think that this work 'may not be come to without much strong travail coming before' and reached but seldom and only in ecstasies, by saying that this is so with some as regards the perfection of this work, for with them God only works in this way extraordinarily. But there are others who are 'so homely with God' and are so subtle in their perception of grace 'that they may have it when they will in the common state of man's soul', and at any time wherever they may be, and even with the full, if difficult, use of all their wits. (c. 71, pp. 165-6). Following in this Richard of St Victor, the author likens the first type to Moses, who could only get to see the ark by climbing a great mountain and being shown the construction of the ark in a

vision, but Aaron, typical of the second group, 'had in his power, because of his office, to see it in the temple within the veil as oft as he liked to enter'. (p. 167).

This fact of the different methods and means of approaching the same end provides an excellent pretext for urging readers not to judge others by their own experience. A man, like Moses, who has to struggle for long years before he is granted the grace of this work, must not presume to lay down the law and tell them they can seldom come to this way of life and only after great labours.

And in the same manner may he be deceived that may have it when he will, if he judge all others accordingly. (c. 72, p. 167).

And he goes on to say that even with the individual the method will vary; he may at first reach this passive 'work' only after prolonged effort but later find that it comes almost at will. In this respect 'the grace of contemplation' may profit a man in three ways: either purely from the grace of God, seldom and without respect to the efforts of the individual, or partly by his own efforts and partly by direct help from God, or finally helped on the way by others' experience and teaching the soul reaches the end with less effort or time spent on the way. (c. 73).

What is so remarkable in this teaching of *The Cloud* is not only that it is a simple, practical summary of a chapter in Richard of St Victor's *Benjamin Major*, but that it should be so broad in its recognition of the variety of God's ways. The higher forms of prayer are not the same in character for all. There are some, too, who do not feel at all drawn to a passive form of prayer.

And if thou thinkest that this manner of working be not according to thy disposition in body and in soul, thou mayest leave it and take another, safely with good ghostly counsel without blame. (c. 74, p. 170).

The whole question of the normal way to sanctity as including the contemplative life and virtues has to be qualified in view of this constant experience as expressed so simply in *The Cloud*. The general doctrine is traditional and certainly true that action must prepare the way for contemplation and lead into it (as *The Cloud* also explains). But when the soul is in fact approaching the higher development which might be called the first buds of holiness, the nature of this contemplation will vary enormously, partly from the man's own character and the particular type of action and asceticism in which he has been engaged, and partly owing to God's unpredictable will, for his Spirit breathes where he listeth. As we have pointed out before, one needs only to read the lives of a few saints to realise how variously holiness, and to that extent contemplation, is realised in

the concrete. Those who are dismayed by the description of the contemplative heights in such books as *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* should bear this firmly in mind. They will find their share of contemplation by waiting upon the Lord and fulfilling his will as it is revealed from moment to moment with all the generosity they possess. They will not find it by forcing themselves into a mould for which they were never intended by character or Providence. The fact of their dismay is one of the external signs that God has not called them to this type of contemplation.

In conclusion we may glance briefly at the nature of 'the work' of *The Cloud* in order to discover if possible the special type of contemplation which the author has in mind. For this we may turn to the eighth chapter of *The Epistle of Privy Counsel* where he gives a brief survey of the special goal with a view to finding the way to it. The procedure follows closely the work of St John of the Cross when he bids his readers cut away all attachments, every kind of earthly tie. In this there are two stages. The first, that of cutting away and remaining superior to the exterior things, is practically taken for granted. The second stage is the most delicate and difficult to accomplish. For having turned in to oneself and realised one's dependence upon God, it is then necessary to forget one's own being:

For although I bid thee in the beginning, because of thy boisterousness and thy ghostly rudeness, lap and clothe the feeling of thy God in the feeling of thyself, yet shalt thou after, when thou art made by continuance more subtle in cleanness of spirit, strip, spoil, and utterly unclothe thyself of all manner of feeling of thyself, that thou mayest be able to be clothed with the gracious feeling of God himself. (*Priv. Couns.* c. 8, p. 214).

This complete despoiling of oneself for God compares closely with the stripping process for which St John of the Cross is so celebrated. The same despoiling of all creatureliness before the face of God is to be found in any genuine mystical work opened almost at random. Thus Bl. Angela of Foligno: "I should strip myself of all earthly things, of all men and women, friends and relations, and of my very self". (cf. *Catholic Mysticism* by A. Thorold. p. 96). Or Francisco de Osuna: 'The earth of our heart must be evacuated of all creatures in order the better to receive God'. (*3rd Spiritual Alphabet*, iv., 4). Or again, 'We must renounce and fly from ourselves, that we may draw near unto God'. (Father Baker, *St Sophia*, I. 1. 3). The first stage regarding other creatures is the Cloud of Forgetting which in a sense blots out all these other things. But even when all other creatures and their works are forgotten

there shall remain yet after betwixt thee and thy God, a naked

knowing and a feeling of thine own being. (*Cloud*, c. 43, p. 104).

This self-consciousness must be constantly attacked so that in the perfection of this work, for brief moments, the soul may become wholly objective in its attitude to God and in its self-forgetfulness. In this purity of spirit the soul can approach God, is in fact led before him so that he may reach to this perfect working which is

nought else but a onehead made betwixt God and it (the soul) in perfect charity. (*Priv. Couns.* c. 7, p. 210).

In this *Cloud* of Unknowing self-consciousness becomes a burden because it is constantly rising up to erect a barrier between self and God. As one cannot get rid of self-awareness, 'then is thyself a cross to thy self'. (*id.* c. 8, p. 216). 'The substance of this work is nought but a naked intent directed unto God for himself'. (*Cloud*, c. 24, p. 68). From the man's point of view this is as far as he can get. There is nothing more that he can do. The rest remains with God.

In fact the substance of the work is really the touch of God on the soul causing this 'naked intent'. If we turn to *The Epistle of Prayer* we shall find the divine action very clearly and simply described.

A soul touched in affection by the sensible presence of God, as he is in himself, and in a perfect soul illumined in the reason, by the clear beam of everlasting light, the which is God, for to see and for to feel the loveliness of God in himself, hath for that time and for that moment lost all the mind of any good deed or of any kindness that ever God did to him in this life—so that cause for to love God for feeleth he or seeth he none in that time, other than is God himself.

This 'beholding to the point and prick of perfection' is a form of union which to the average Christian will be rare and which implies a wonderful and mysterious action of God on the soul so that nothing divides the one from the other.

Though all that God and he be two and sere in kind, nevertheless yet in grace they are so knit together that they are but one in spirit; and all this is for onehead of love and accordance of will; and in this onehead is the marriage made between God and the soul.⁴

This work of union in its mysterious profundity will require closer consideration.

⁴ *Epistle of Prayer*. pp. 85 and 88 in Edmund Gardner's edition of *The Cell of Self-Knowledge*.